WHAT GOOD HOUSING MEANS

JOHN IHLDER

[Reprinted from American Journal of Public Health, Vol. 4, No. 1]

WHAT GOOD HOUSING MEANS.

JOHN IHLDER,
Field Secretary, National Housing Association.

Read by title, before the General Sessions, American Public Health Association, Colorado Springs, September, 1913.

The question of how we, individually and as communities, are to secure good houses has recently begun to attract national attention. As usual it began in a negative way with hot debates over certain details. Also, as was natural, it began with a study of the worst phase of our housing—the piled-up tenement dwellings of our largest cities. But during the past three years the growth of interest in housing has been so great that we can now cease to confine our attention to the worst housing abuses and begin to think of housing in a broader way as it concerns us all.

The rapid change in our point of view is evidenced by the change in housing legislation. Three years ago such legislation dealt almost exclusively with tenement houses or multiple dwellings. In some cities, as in Boston, a tenement house was defined as one that contained four or more families. Consequently only a small fraction of three-decker Boston was subject to regulation. In a larger number of cities the tenement house was defined as one that contained three or more families. This was the New York rule, and was copied by many other cities. In New York, and especially on Manhattan Island, the great barracks dwelling had become so common that the law safeguarded in a measure a very considerable proportion of the people. But even in New York, notably in Brooklyn and in the outlying districts, there were large areas where the tenement house had not yet appeared in any great numbers and where, consequently, housing was not regulated in the interest of the tenant or of the community. In the smaller cities which imitated New York's law the effect was scarcely noticeable.

The trouble was that we had permitted ourselves to believe the problem purely a problem of the tenements of the poor, that the need was adequately met if we saw to it that the barracks, which we assumed were the only dwellings that could be erected for the urban poor, were provided with certain minimums of light, air, water, toilet conveniences and safeguards against fire. Of course those who were working on the problem knew the falsity of this belief. When they came to impose minimum restrictions for tenements on the lower East Side of New York they found that these minimums were greater than the amounts given to the well-to-do in many expensive apartment houses. Fortunately it proved impracticable to

331.83
Ih4w
cop.1

draw a legal distinction between the tenement house and the apartment house, so those of us who live in New York are sharing in the benefits of the poor.

But for all this the idea persisted that tenement house legislation was a boon from which the more fortunate members of the community—those who in popular phrase are "able to look out for themselves"—and the community as a whole benefited only indirectly if at all. Consequently recent laws, like that applying to the New York state cities of the second class, mark a tremendous development of our understanding. This law covers not only multiple dwellings but two family houses and private dwellings as well. And it covers not only buildings in which families are supposed to live more or less permanently, but also lodging houses, hotels, and other temporary shelters for the detached. This law will protect the merchant, the lawyer, the salaried man, even the city sanitarian and the health officer, and their families, against the development of evil conditions from which as individuals they would be powerless to escape—even though they do belong to a class which is mistakenly supposed to be able to look out for itself. When Manhattan became an island of tenements, many who are classed as well-to-do found that they were forced to live in tenements, and in such tenements as were provided for them, with gloomy, airless bedrooms, and dark, smelly kitchens. We like to think that we are free agents, but as a matter of fact we usually take what is handed to us. Our chief means of protection is to make the handers keep all their goods up to a wholesome standard.

So we have begun to realize that the problem of getting good houses is not merely a problem of the poor. It is not a problem of any one class, to be solved in a more or less superficial way and then forgotten. It is a problem that affects directly and vitally the whole community. Consequently it is essential that we stop looking at it from a purely professional point of view and take into consideration the human relationships that are involved.

There is some basis for the widespread distrust of the professional man. Experience seems to show that our custom of putting an amateur to boss a professional has its practical benefits. For if we give the professional all the rope he wants he is apt to hitch it to his own particular professional star—a proceeding sanctioned by high authority—and then climb clear out of sight of the multitude leaving practical problems unsolved.

There is the architect who is so interested in his elevations, in the placing of his windows so that they will compose properly when viewed from the street, that he quite forgets the people who are to live inside the house and make practical use of the windows. There is the builder whose attention is concentrated upon the capitalist, who thinks of houses only as revenue producers, entirely ignoring the people who are to pay the revenue.

Recently in Boston I met one of these builders. He was very indignant over the present agitation to secure laws that will make the Boston three-decker less of a fire hazard. Such legislation will, of course, decrease the number of three-deckers by increasing their cost. Incidentally it will probably increase the number of two-family and single-family houses. This to him seemed a wanton injury to the small investor. He cited the instance of a man for whom he is building a three-decker. This man was just able, under present conditions, to get enough capital for his enterprise. When it is finished he will have an apartment for himself and two to rent, so getting a good return on his investment. If the proposed law were enacted the man would have to be content with a two-family house. This, the builder thought, an unjustifiable invasion of the man's right to do as he would with his capital.

"Why," he explained, "I live on the third floor of a three-decker myself. I prefer it because I get better light and air up there."

Not until after he had said it did he realize that for every third-floor family there are two deprived of the light and air shut off by the third-floor apartment.

The health officer, the sanitarian and other scientists who serve the community are, perhaps, not subject to such comments as this, except when they are compelled to submit to political pressure. Their professional interests are more impersonal, they are not so greatly tempted to serve one class at the expense of another. But assuming this, can they do their full duty if they approach their work only from the professional standpoint? Is there not danger that the interest of professional problems, detailed technical problems, will blind them to larger human problems in the solution of which they can and should, by virtue of their offices, exert a great influence?

This is the day of the specialist, and because of the specialist we have made great advances. But also, because the specialist has tended to confine himself to his speciality, we have suffered some serious losses. The friendly, human attitude of the old-fashioned family physician was an asset that balanced a good deal of liability in the way of lack of technical knowledge. His title of "family doctor" is the key to much of his success. To him the world was not what it is coming to be in this age of obstetricians and baby specialists, when each process is presided over by a different man, a world of individuals. It was a world of families. This leaves a place to be filled, and by whom can it be better filled than by you whose interest is in the well-being of the whole community?

Yet as one reads over the titles of the papers submitted to this conference he feels that the community doctors cannot have fully realized the opportunity open to them. Here we have learned discussions on a multitude of technical details, but all treating mankind as an unrelated mass of indi-

viduals. And this though we all know that the community is not composed of so many thousand population except in the census returns and in the dreams of the Chamber of Commerce. It, or the only really important part of it, the part that brought us up from savagery, the part that carries our hope of a better civilization in the future, the part that holds us safe and secure in the present, is composed of families, of households.

It is important that we have a pure water supply, that we dispose of our garbage and rubbish in a sanitary manner, that the milk for the babies be clean and nourishing. And it is important that we learn from each other the latest and most scientific methods of bringing all these good things about. For it is important that we keep what we have. But it is not less important that we be able to get more than we have at present. It is a rule of life that we must either advance or retreat, we cannot stand still. And to get more we must make the conditions such as will encourage *production*, not merely miserly safeguarding. This means we must give attention to the family as the unit of society rather than concentrate our attention upon individuals.

We deal much in assumptions, necessarily, having only three score years and ten in which to reach our conclusions. But occasionally it is necessary to take up an old assumption and examine it. Most of our cities assumed until two or three years ago that they were cities of homes. Now they are examining that assumption and they find it needs revision. We have assumed—in spite of talk about easy divorce and the advisability of requiring a physical examination before marriage—that the American family was getting along famously. Is it? Are there not developing in our cities conditions that threaten the American family more than do easy divorce and venereal diseases? May it not even be that these conditions have something to do with the increase of divorce and the prevalence of venereal disease? The specialists in these two epidemics get an occasional glimpse at their causes. But are not you, who are so interested in keeping down the death rate, really in a better position than others to learn what keeps down the birth rate? And being in such a position should you not take advantage of it, and, having learned, use all your influence to prevent or to remove the causes?

Of course I am somewhat subject to the limitations of the specialist myself. But it seems to me that my specialty throws at least a side-light on the problem. There is, I believe, as direct a connection between the kind of house a family lives in and the vitality of its family life as there is between a windowless bedroom and the physical condition of the individual who sleeps in that bedroom. Sociologists have begun to show a considerable interest in the effect of the house upon the family. Dr. Charles W. Eliot, president emeritus of Harvard, said:

"Bad housing is the fundamental evil in all cities, for it develops many

physical and moral evils. It is the main problem not only of large cities like Brooklyn, but of small cities like Cambridge. At this moment in Cambridge, three-family houses are being rapidly erected with not more land about them than is sufficient for passage on foot; and they are mostly of flimsy construction in wood. The rent of a flat in these houses is higher than that of an independent house with a garden was in Cambridge thirty years ago. This kind of dwelling obliges its occupants to have almost all their recreation outside the dwelling, in the streets, theatres, saloons, and other public places. An immense change in family life is consequently going on in all our urban population."

Observers in New York and in Philadelphia have noted that the small house of Philadelphia encourages a neighborliness that forms the basis of wholesome social relations between families, which is conspicuously lacking in tenement-house New York. Tenement parents and children make their friends as individuals not as members of families, and their companionship and amusement are sought on the street, not in the home. As the number of rooms grows smaller, as the size of the rooms diminishes, which they inevitably do in barracks construction, friends are crowded out, additions to the family crowded back. The very type of building tends to discourage any natural instinct for having children. In the apartment they are constantly under foot, in the halls they are a nuisance to neighbors who are neighbors by proximity only, on the street they choose their companions from a whole city full without let or guidance. The apartment is not in any sense a home, except in the primary one that it offers shelter from the elements. And in that it is better only in degree than the cave which sheltered our remote ancestors. All the customs and the sentiments that have grown up around the home since we began to build houses must be cast aside if we again seek refuge in cliff dwellings. And with the going of the home will go the old conception of the family.

I have a great faith in statistics. It began when I believed implicitly in a single statistic that I had dug out for myself. It persists now when I wait for the returns of the United States census—and sometimes find the waiting long. It leads me to seize with avidity upon such a statistical discovery as that of Dr. Walter F. Willcox of Cornell, that single men die more readily than married ones. For that is as it should be. It makes interesting the pages of long reports on hookworm which show the close connection between a certain phase of bad housing and disease. And it shows an underlying cause of the decreasing birth rate that at present is so alarming Germany, as France has been alarmed for more than a generation.

In Germany the professors of preventive medicine have scored many victories. As a result the death rate has fallen steadily. But like those of France they have failed to keep up the birth rate. Especially in the

larger cities, which like New York and Paris are cities of tenements, is the decrease notable. Statistics show that in Berlin the proportion of childless couples is increasing and that the two-child limit is becoming the normal thing. And this just at a time when we had begun to hope that we could make our cities self-perpetuating. No longer were we to admit with humiliation that the city, which is the center of civilization, destroys those who make it glorious. We prophesied that the time was at hand when the city would be so sanitary that no longer would it be necessary to draw upon the country for raw recruits to take the places of vanished city families. And just as we were about to proclaim our triumph, we find that the fight is still far from won.

We have done great things, and in the doing of them have created a new profession, that of preventive medicine. Since the days when the physician was content to cure those already sick to these days when the physician, whatever his technical titles, labors to keep men from becoming sick, we have advanced far. But perhaps the time has now come when we must create another profession, that of "constructive medicine." Its field may be even larger than the field of preventive medicine, the multitude of its practitioners divided into a greater number of groups than those who now guard our food, our water, our air and our neighbors from infection and contagion. And one of its tasks will be to see that our houses are adapted to serve as family homes. For that is what good housing means.

What we have won in the long fight to make our living conditions more sanitary, we must keep. And as our cities still have thousands of windowless rooms, hundred of thousands of disease-spreading privy vaults, we must add much to what we have already won. But at the same time we must bear in mind that a house, even if it is superlatively sanitary, may not be a good home, and so be on the alert to check bad types, to encourage good types of houses. Otherwise the day may come when, our preventive work successfully finished, we shall look about us and see a race that perishes, though without disease.

Then we may understand the feelings of the Mobile darky of whom I heard last winter. He was about to be hanged. Before letting him fall the sheriff, who was a tender-hearted man, said, "George, would you like to say a few last words befo' I let you go?" "Yass, sah, yaas Mist. Sheriff, I would like to say a few last words," replied George, "Ah'd jest lake to say that this curtainly will be a lesson to me."